

# SO HOT, SO COLD

## 那麼熱，那麼冷

Winner of the 2013 China Times Open Book Award

Winner of the 2014 Taipei Book Fair Award

Winner of the 2014 Golden Tripod Award

While the short story form is held in high esteem in Taiwan, there are few published collections that have attracted the kind of attention Wang Ting-Kuo's *So Hot, So Cold* has, with awards coming fast and steady over 2013 and 2014. Not only was this a result of Wang's standing in literary circles, but also because of the stories themselves, hewn from the solemn weight of emotion contained within them, yet forged with the lightest, most elegant prose.

Wang's characters embark on extramarital affairs, buckle under intense peer pressure, bear grudges against their fathers, and deal with illness and marital breakdown across five intense stories of Taiwanese families in crisis. These are the stories of the everyday, written with an extraordinary poetry, the emotional tempests beneath the calm exteriors of every family.

Compared to Wang's earlier, more politically conscious work, *So Hot, So Cold* sees him turn to the human heart, to explore the battle between passion and detachment and the gulf between ambition and disappointment that exists inside all of us. It is this breadth that makes Wang Ting-Kuo such a crucial figure in Taiwanese literature.

### Wang Ting-Kuo 王定國

Born in Lukang in 1955, Wang now lives in Taichung. He started writing at the age of seventeen, and from eighteen his short stories began winning prizes all over the island, including the *China Times* and *Unitas* awards. He has worked in fields as diverse as building design, surveying and advertising. His early writings were love songs to nature and youth, but in his twenties he took a distinctly more politically conscious turn, mixing reportage and commentary with novels about the downtrodden in society. He stopped writing for many years while he built up his own company, until 2003, when he returned to widespread acclaim with a series of books including *So Hot, So Cold* and his most recent collection, *Who Blinked in the Dark*.



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By Wang Ting-Kuo. Translated by Jeremy Tiang.

In an alleyway lined by seven households, the intercom suddenly chomped into the afternoon chirping of insects. Tsai Ou-Yang Ching-Mei, at that moment feeding the cat, went still as her body tensed. After a few seconds, another buzz; the mechanism pressing down on the throat of the wires. She knew this was probably a short circuit caused by the previous night's thunderstorm, but even so, it felt like an ill omen. She batted the cat away and hesitated, knowing very well this was the old Monkey returning home after twenty years. In the end it might be better to hold on a little longer, hoping he'd rub his nose and leave to continue his solitary walk through the world.

But Tsai Kung-Wan wasn't giving up; if he were the sort to do that, he wouldn't have steeled himself to show up here. The brim of his malt-coloured cap pressed down between his eyebrows, a cloth bag hung diagonally across his chest, and in his hand was what might as well be the very same simple bundle of possessions he'd left with, back when he'd run off into the night. He pressed the buzzer three times, unleashing his anger onto the intercom. Every household cried back to him, some humming in a low tone, others asking who on earth he was looking for? Wouldn't that be Tsai Ou-Yang Ching-Mei? Rather than call her name, being certain she was listening, he could only clear his throat and say: 'It's... me.' He didn't expect that burst of noise, nor that everyone would hang up on him, whether they ought to or not.

Tsai Ou-Yang Ching-Mei held back half an hour before finally pressing the button to open the gate. Several months later, she would continue to ponder whether, in that blank space of waiting, he'd gone to find a telegraph pole to piss against, or if he really did just stand by the gate the whole time, gambling that she'd eventually surrender. Only the security gate had prevented him from barging in.

This house had been a grand gesture on the part of her son, Tsai Tzu-Shi, after he'd made his fortune. Not only did it possess front and back yards, even the side wall had a parade of plum and cherry blossom lined up before it, a spectacle that the old Monkey had never seen before, not even in his dreams. Sure enough, as soon as he entered he was stunned by it. Their reunion after so many years had drifted lightly past, but now she couldn't look directly at him, and he too was compelled to keep his eyes averted. They had nothing to say, and just released two more puffs of air into the air around them. She glared as the old leather suitcase came to rest beneath the table, and seeing the rucksack in his other hand descend towards the coffee table, quickly gestured for it to be diverted to the corridor floor. She might as well let him see how territorial she'd become over the last few years, and anyway it wasn't clear how long he'd be staying, for which month or year his departure was fixed.

Tsai Kung-Wan, a self-acknowledged trouble-maker, walked briskly from the front porch to the back garden, trying to dispel the homesickness of arriving under someone else's roof, hoping to create a belated sense of familial closeness. The pomegranate flowers at the rear were a spray of bright red, as if echoing the white roses out front. Impossible to believe this was the religious practice of Tsai Ou-Yang Ching-Mei, arising out of nowhere. Finishing his inspection of the perimeter, he folded his arms and began walking slowly around, glancing at the picture frames atop the cupboard, examining the little lamps on the side tables, always maintaining his own humble posture while

sampling these little offerings. After a while, he noticed his wife was no longer in his field of vision, and began to roughly handle some ornaments he'd never seen before.

After five, the clank of metal against metal suggested cooking sounds, and he finally thawed a little. Yet when he came to the dining table, there were only a few sad plates of leftovers—she'd carried her own food upstairs, leaving him to quietly gobble down his pitiable evening meal.

When the living room grew dark, Tsai Kung-Wan grabbed his luggage and headed up. Unable to find the staircase light switch, he could only rely on the glow spilling from somewhere above. The door to the upstairs room had a pair of slippers before it, but did that mean she was inside with bare feet, or was it a hint that he should put them on before entering the room? She was obviously still in a temper and he couldn't risk guessing wrong, so he proceeded up to the third storey, his suitcase not touching the floor, taking each step on the balls of his feet. But with immaculately bad timing, just as he reached a bend in the stairs, he looked up to see the bathroom door swing open beneath the ceiling light and out she walked, still pulling up her knickers, unable to cover her upper half in time, swaying into full view like a bare tree, all dead leaves and broken branches.

Each time he remembered that moment, Tsai Kung-Wan had to suppress a shudder—her wide-mouthed shriek, her voice strangely absent, like an echo dropping out of mid-air. When he finally made it to the top floor, Tsai Kung-Wan could only find an old sofa to lie on, and with hands pillowing his head as he stared up at the ceiling, he reflected that it was only natural that he'd have to suffer a scolding. Yet, given the circumstances, was it really necessary for her to be in such a rage? That pair of old tits had begun drooping long ago, like a couple of sunflowers in their last days.

A dark shadow he was unable to dispel danced before his eyes. He thought of the photographs, all different sizes, on display in the living room. Apart from a few solo portraits, the family shots never featured more than four people: Tsai Ou-Yang Ching-Mei, Tsai Tzu-Shi, Tsai Mo, and sometimes his daughter-in-law Tsai Se-Fen. Even the young outsider who'd married into the family had the surname Tsai, claiming her space in the family tree, three generations of only children. The one person missing in all this was him, the true head of the household. Every face in those pictures was smiling coldly at him. No one was waving, and even the smallest crack that he might have squeezed into had been filled. It was too late. So this was to be his icy reception. It was the small hours of the morning and he still couldn't sleep. If he'd known what was in store, he would never have pressed the damned buzzer.

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He'd been tricked. The ritual for welcoming him home was originally supposed to go like this: Tsai Tzu-Shi would meet him at the train station, his daughter-in-law would be in charge of their reunion dinner, and even his grandson Tsai Mo, finding someone else to take his shift, would hurry over to join them. The negotiations had been filled with a suspicious amount of filial love, one phone call after another urging him to come, until in the end he had grown worried that this burst of sincerity might be withdrawn. Having agreed to come, he decided to make matters clear.

But will your old mother agree to this?

Why wouldn't she? When she heard you wanted to come back, she couldn't stop smiling, she was so happy.

The son he hadn't seen in so many years had grown up treacherous and crafty, he was forced to admit to

himself. Of course, after he'd been back half a year, they managed to carve out an accommodation like the old married couple they were, leaving behind the vengeance and rage of that initial encounter. He slept on the second floor, behind the door with the slippers. She moved to the third floor, where the room next to hers was given over to devotions, so the whole level became her kingdom where she could begin chanting scripture first thing in the morning, the mystical sounds travelling out through the balcony and landing in the flower groves below, causing the petals and dewdrops to tremble. Breakfast was at eight, with Tsai Kung-Wan in charge of the freshly-squeezed fruit juice, one glass each, after which they helped themselves to whole wheat toast, two mouths chewing on their own loneliness, moving at different speeds, their only common ground the silence they shared.

Each day's beginning resembled its end. Tsai Kung-Wan once tried rising early, following her as she knelt on the prayer cushion, and while he didn't understand the Buddhist scripture that squirmed into his ears, he knew the importance of repentance. Yet even before his knees touched the ground, she'd already said her prayers three times and was already crawling away as if making her escape. That morning he faced the Buddha alone, finding himself in the position of chief worshipper rather than as bystander as he'd planned. His hands met, hovering in mid-air, but he didn't know what to say. Not a single word would come.

Remembering the night he left—although it was hurried, husband and wife still clung close to each other, she helping him lift his bag, her other hand hooked into the cuff of his sleeve, not tightly but still unwilling to let go, like a sad film playing out in the living room where they didn't dare turn the lights on. Who could have known that everything would be entirely different so many years later. Now that he had returned, they were living in a silent movie.

When the fuss dies down, you must hurry back. I'm afraid...

Afraid of what? I'm only going away for a little while, do you think I want to travel round the world?

Apparently, by the next morning, several swarthy thugs were already camped out at the shop entrance, flinging eggs and splashing buckets of urine, waves of red paint colouring the brick wall. If he hadn't escaped when he did in the middle of the night, he'd have ended up either in hospital or in prison.

From this one incident, he at least understood that there was no such thing as normal human existence. Before sunset, he was still hanging around, but as soon as dinner ended he was hurriedly packing a bag. All this because of money. The stationery shop had been doing worse year after year, and only after they started selling number forecasts for the Mark Six lottery did some money start coming in. The sweet taste of cash, and the urgings of those around him, finally led him to become bookmaker.

That afternoon happened to be when the typhoon departed. While the wind was still gusting, the streets and alleyways were unnaturally quiet. He heard a miracle had arrived in the small town, and those who reacted quickly had already gathered on a muddy riverbed in the western suburbs. Tsai Kung-Wan, arriving late, had no sooner got his bicycle onto the bridge when he looked up to see the banks to both sides were impassable. All he could do for the time being was lean against the railing as if listening to a joke, a cigarette clamped between his lips, shrieks of excitement from those searching for floating numbers on the stony beach filling the air.

And it was at this moment, from his vantage point, that Tsai Kung-Wan saw the hand of God.

From where he was standing, he noticed a glowing patch of water that no one else had paid attention to. In the light, he could clearly make out distinct numbers made of heaped pebbles. God had arrived and waited a long time

by the empty riverside. Then, after the hordes showed up, he left one final hint at the end of the shoreline just for the fifty-year-old Tsai Kung-Wan, a man who'd been cheerless since childhood. Unable to squeeze down the little path beneath the bridge, he burrowed through the waves of wild grass to the right, awkwardly carving out a winding track, until he stepped onto the untenanted stone beach on a stretch of water flowing the other way.

An excavator was rumbling on the riverbed, carrying out some kind of water-cleaning operation. Lacking any better ideas, and with the sudden courage of inspiration, he started negotiating with the driver in his hard hat. It took all the cash he had on him, but in an instant he was climbing into the monstrous hand of its bucket. The engine started and he rose in the air like a passenger alone in a Ferris wheel.

Finally, he was able to catch sight of those mystic numbers. Even from a different angle, the intent of God remained firm. No matter how nakedly sincere the fools on the shore were, he alone was permitted a glimpse of the divine. There was no doubting those numbers. They were a moment of true teaching, and if he didn't accept the lesson into his heart, he could give up any hope of a better life.

At that moment, the sky suddenly unleashed a light shower. Tsai Kung-Wan returned to the shop, shook awake the drowsing Tsai Ou-Yang Ching-Mei, and began blocking off the numbers he'd seen so no one else could play them. Feeling that wasn't enough, he phoned round to place bets with other gambling outfits, then greedily swallowed a pile of punters' stakes. And so, in the final second of the First Division draw, Tsai Kung-Wan finally received the moment of good luck he'd been waiting half a lifetime for: his ticket to sudden riches.

Twenty years later, he could still recall the number on the riverbank that day. Stone, mud and infinite mystery, creating two circles that barely touched, an eight laid down on its side, a large pair of intelligent eyes loaded with emotion and staring straight at him.

This was definitely the mark of God. Yet, somehow, it would transform into a demonic shadow.

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Ching-Mei had seen her on television before, but she was prettier and younger in person. The presenter gave a tour of the Tsai residence inside and out and then started waving at her: 'Granny, granny, why don't you come and say a few words to the audience.' Ching-Mei was hiding behind a cupboard, shielding herself with her hands, but the camera had already swung her way. Tsai Kung-Wan was waiting in place, ready for a photograph with her. She didn't want to stand beside her husband and spent some time spinning excuses, while the cameraman called cut repeatedly, their son stamping his feet anxiously as he looked on.

When the segment was shown on TV, she realised Tsai Kung-Wan was almost bald and the remaining bits of hair—specially dyed black for the occasion—looked like sad, withered strands across his pate. She didn't normally pay much attention to his pitiful appearance, but now it had been forced upon her. The programme was called *Visit to a Small Town*, and after telling viewers about the temples, night markets and local produce, the latter half was taken up with a profile of their model entrepreneur son, Tsai Tzu-Shi. Ah Shi had dictated the whole thing, from how the two old people should be dressed to what answers they ought to give. They'd begun rehearsing the show of parental affection three months previously, with Ah Shi everywhere at once, his eye on every detail, dressed smart in a black suit, red tie and sparkling blue cufflinks, as ecstatic as double-happiness cranes flying across one way and then

the other.

But she could tell her daughter-in-law Se-Fen was unhappy, carrying out a platter of fruits then retreating to the kitchen, denied the role of the loving wife. She may not have been her daughter by blood, but still Ching-Mei's heart ached to think Se-Fen might eventually end up like her. Her son had turned the truth on its head. Who knew what really went on between a married couple, but she knew her son never came back before midnight, and even then was always carried home completely smashed. The whole picture of family happiness was a false one. The only real thing here was the trick to get old Monkey home, all for the sake of this momentary portrayal of tri-generational harmony.

Most pitiable, of course, was her obedient grandson Ah Mo, trapped in the situation by his father, his eyes as dull as a dead fish's. She knew how Ah Mo had come to be like this, his perfectly decent girlfriend running off because of the old Monkey. A shame. The girl, Little Mi, was quite the looker, and had been a sweetheart from the beginning. On her first visit, she'd happily pressed and rubbed Ching-Mei's aching shoulders. She said nice things too. Ching-Mei had found her adorable.

As she shut her eyes, intoxicated by the massage, she realised she knew the girl from somewhere. She pursued the thought through neighbours' houses, the town marketplace, every shop on the high street. The moment the old Monkey arrived back from grocery shopping, and right there, in their living room, two trains smashed straight into each other. The old Monkey's eyes boiled over and the girl subsided into terrified silence. In an instant, as they faced each other, the festive atmosphere plunged below zero.

Later on, she worked out the answer on her own: the woman on the recycling truck.

Back then, Tsai Ou-Yang Ching-Mei would take out the rubbish every two days. The collectors arrived at seven in the evening, and her bags were always the smallest there—shrunk, like her appetite after the menopause. She always waited quietly in the stairwell until everyone else was done, before coming out to add to the pile. It was at the height of summer, in the vague half-light of sunset, that she finally saw Tsai Kung-Wan, who had been missing for so many years. He was astride the recycling truck, one hand on the controls, the other grabbing the bags of separated trash flung to him by his female assistant. Only after every household's refuse had been disposed of did the truck finally stop playing the jingle that announced its arrival to the neighbourhood. Tsai Kung-Wan fondled the girl's little rump before jumping down and back into the driver's seat.

And then, he suddenly shouted at the building: 'Hey, lady, your bag? Are you waiting for the last shift?'

She clutched her bag tightly, her senses scattered by shock, and darted behind another pillar, only to stumble and fall backwards. Now she was fully laid out before him. It was Tsai Kung-Wan's turn to be stunned—without another word, he quickly started the truck. By the time she'd crawled to her feet, the truck's song, *A Maiden's Prayer*, had turned into an urgent allegro by the vehicle's acceleration. She could only see half its rear, then it escaped entirely down a side street, and the prayer grew ever quieter until it finally floated off into the night sky.

She stopped leaving the house. Bags of rubbish piled up against the wall, the rotting stench in the air making her eyes water. There was still remained one thing she was terrified of: that through a gap in the window, though sound or light rays, even through the ceiling, all kinds of destructive poisons would seep in drop by drop, the fumes causing her to panic. She put up innumerable seals, plugging the demon gaps. She blocked off every light source and didn't allow a single sound to enter. There was the danger at every moment. Yet she also knew this was just normal,

that every day would find her here, calmly waiting, and that one day, Tsai Kung-Wan would come knocking in the middle of the night—this hope was never punctured. She refused her son and daughter-in-law's offer to come live with them, because she couldn't believe his absence was permanent. She would rather go on waiting. Such loneliness was fitting for the wretched goodbye that night.

When her daughter-in-law came to clear the mountain of rubbish, she was lying in hospital, undergoing psychiatric therapy, calling out her fragmented memories of Tsai Kung-Wan. What's the happiest time you can remember? Tsai Kung-Wan. What are you afraid of? Tsai Kung-Wan. Who's picking you up after you're discharged? Tsai Kung-Wan. And who do you least want to see? Tsai Kung-Wan. During that period, Tsai Kung-Wan seemed to have occupied not just her entire brain, but her tongue and lips as well. She clutched the Buddhist prayer beads her daughter-in-law brought, each line of scripture like a curse, pinching and twirling the beads until her finger pads ruptured and threads of blood oozed out. She sank into confusion, the dark night of her isolation, borderless in her mind, slowly turning a blank white.

She had no memory of any other man in her life. They'd been matched and married at twenty, only for her to discover three days later that he'd been lying about working in a government school. But she didn't weep or complain and was content to run around alongside him, taking on all kinds of odd jobs, clutching on to the rare moments of happiness stuck to the back seat of his motorbike. All that remained.

Her mistake was believing that waiting was the same as hope. She dreamed he'd been murdered, but wasn't frightened when she woke up because life and death didn't count unless Tsai Kung-Wan came and told her in person. She'd never imagined herself to be the victim. Even as she scrambled back to her own front door to the strains of *A Maiden's Prayer*, she was already telling herself how ridiculous this latest hallucination was.

She very seldom looked back at her own life, which had been long and simple. She'd gotten on the wrong train, which happened to be an express, and only at the last stop did she notice the station was unfamiliar. Dragging herself down onto the platform, she walked slowly, towards the present dusk. Now she was no longer as melancholy. The day Ah Mo brought his girlfriend to visit was just as unruffled. She was calm, collected, her sorrow gone completely.